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Symbolic interaction and social media influence on junior athletes: a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Background Problems: Social media platforms are increasingly becoming a crucial component of junior athletes' daily lives, potentially shaping their athletic identity development and sporting performance. **Research Objectives:** The purpose of this systematic review was to carefully map and integrate the existing body of research on the impact of social media on junior athletes' sporting performance, with a particular focus on the process of identity formation as interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory. **Methods:** This scoping review followed PRISMA-ScR guidelines and searched five electronic databases (SciSpace, PubMed, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus) for studies published between 2005 and 2025. Findings from eligible studies were synthesized using a theory-informed thematic analysis guided by three core symbolic interactionist constructs: meaning construction, social interaction processes, and identity negotiation. **Results:** From an initial dataset of 122 records, 12 studies met the inclusion criteria established after the systematic review process. The included studies addressed three main themes: (1) Identity Construction and Self-Presentation – athletes actively engage in multifaceted identity formulation through social media platforms; (2) Peer Influence and Social Support - social media serves as a channel for constructive peer support and the emergence of performance-related anxiety; and (3) Performance Impact Mechanisms - there is a complex relationship between social media usage patterns and athletic performance outcomes. **Conclusion:** Current research indicates that social media significantly impacts junior athletes' identity formation and athletic performance through symbolic interaction processes. However, there are significant gaps in the literature, particularly regarding longitudinal studies, cross-cultural analyses, and intervention-focused research.



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Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed how youth athletes interact with their sociocultural environments, shape their identities, and strive for athletic excellence (Dasmadi et al., 2023; Erfani, 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Tsai & Shih, 2018). Social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook, have permeated the daily lives of adolescents aged 12 to 18, with over 95% of adolescents owning smartphones and 85% actively engaging with social media platforms (Emily A. Vogels, 2022; Zimba, 2021). For youth athletes, these platforms serve not only as a means of communication but also as a complex arena for identity negotiation, peer

interaction, and performance validation (Yoda et al., 2024). The convergence of social media and youth athletics presents unique opportunities and challenges (Bentivegna & Artieri, 2020; Girardin et al., 2020; Irele et al., 2024). While these platforms provide unparalleled access to training resources, peer support systems, and performance evaluation, they simultaneously introduce new pressures related to public scrutiny, peer comparison, and the commodification of athletic identity (Hayes & Geurin, 2019). Understanding how these digital interactions impact actual athletic performance requires a theoretical framework capable of encompassing the complex processes of meaning and identity formation (Zeinab Zaremohzzabieh, Rusli Abdullah, 2024).

Symbolic interactionism, originally conceptualized by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, serves as a highly relevant theoretical framework for analyzing the impact of social media on junior athletes (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Simbolik & Mead, 2024; Wijesinghe, 2022; Zadeh et al., 2021). This theoretical orientation underscores three fundamental principles: (1) individuals interact with objects based on the significance they attribute to them; (2) this significance emerges from social interactions; and (3) significance can be modified through interpretive processes (Carter & Fuller, 2016). In the context of social media and junior athletes, symbolic interactionism explains the mechanisms through which young athletes: construct and negotiate their athletic identities through digital self-presentation; interpret and react to peer feedback and social support; formulate meaning from their athletic experiences through social media engagement; and cultivate their self-concept as athletes through ongoing digital communication (Doyle et al., 2020; Rizky Nurulfa, 2017; Zimba, 2021). This theoretical framework recognizes that athletic identity is not static but is continually shaped through social interactions, making social media platforms a crucial arena for identity development among junior athletes (Dawadi et al., 2021; Mcmeekin et al., 2020).

Despite the increasing prevalence of social media use among junior athletes and its potential impact on their developmental trajectories, the existing literature remains fragmented across academic domains, including sport psychology, communication studies, and adolescent development research (Sinulingga et al., 2024). Previous reviews have largely focused on elite or adult athletes (Smith & Sanderson, 2015), adverse consequences such as cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2019), or general adolescent groups without explicitly considering the athletic context (Popat & Tarrant, 2023).

Key knowledge gaps include: A lack of systematic synthesis of research specifically targeting junior athletes (ages 12–18); Inadequate integration of theoretical frameworks to explain underlying mechanisms; A lack of a comprehensive mapping of the positive and negative effects of social media on athletic performance; and a limited understanding of how identity formation processes mediate the relationship between social media use and athletic performance (Gusderawati, 2021). This study aims to systematically describe and synthesize existing research on the influence of social media on junior athletes' athletic performance, with a particular focus on phenomena explained through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory. Specific objectives include: To identify and characterize the scope and nature of scholarly research on the impact of social media on junior athletes' athletic performance. To investigate the application of symbolic interactionism theory to explain the role of social media in athletic identity formation. To synthesize key findings regarding the mechanisms by which social media influences athletic performance and achievement. To identify gaps in current knowledge and propose avenues for future scholarly exploration. To provide evidence-based recommendations for stakeholders, including athletes, coaches, parents, and sport organizations.

Method

Study Design This scoping review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines (Aulia et al., 2022; Hardovi et al., 2025; Page et al., 2021; Tricco, A.C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., 2018). The methodological framework was based on the model established by Arksey and O'Malley (Westphaln et al., 2021) and later refined by Nicola et al (Mcmeekin et al., 2020), which includes five distinct stages: (1) identification of the research question, (2) identification of relevant studies, (3) selection of studies, (4) organization of data, and (5) synthesis, summary, and presentation of findings. **Research Questions** Using the Population-Concept-Context (PFC) framework, we outlined the following research questions: Population (P): Junior athletes between the ages of 12 and 18. Concept (K): The impact of social media on athletic performance. Context (K): Theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (Aulia et al., 2022; Hardovi et al., 2025; Tricco, A.C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., 2018; Tricco et al., 2018).

Primary Research Question: How does social media use influence the athletic performance of junior athletes through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory? **Secondary Research Question:** What symbolic meanings do junior athletes attribute to social media engagement as it relates to their athletic performance? How do peer interactions on social media platforms influence self-concept and athletic identity formation among junior athletes? What role does social media play in the construction and communication of athletic identity within

the junior athlete demographic? How do environmental and cultural contexts moderate the relationship between social media use and athletic performance? What specific indicators of athletic performance are most dominantly influenced by social media interactions among junior athletes? Search Strategy Database Selection We conducted a comprehensive search of five different electronic databases: SciSpace, PubMed/MEDLINE, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus.

To ensure theoretical consistency throughout the review process, symbolic interactionism was operationalized through three analytical constructs derived from Mead and Blumer: meaning construction, social interaction, and identity negotiation.

Meaning construction referred to how junior athletes interpreted social media feedback, engagement metrics, athletic achievements, and performance-related content. Social interaction referred to interactions with teammates, coaches, peers, supporters, and online audiences that shaped athletes' perceptions and behaviors. Identity negotiation referred to processes of self-presentation, impression management, athletic self-concept development, and identity validation within digital environments.

These constructs were incorporated into the data extraction framework and guided thematic synthesis across all included studies.

These databases were carefully selected to cover a broad spectrum of literature related to sport science, psychology, communication studies, and interdisciplinary research domains. Search Terms and Boolean Operators The search methodology used three conceptual categories combined with Boolean operators: Population Keywords: ("junior athlete*" OR "young athlete*" OR "adolescent athlete*" OR "young athlete*" OR "teen athlete*" OR "student athlete*" OR "youth athlete*" OR "high school athlete*") Concept Keywords (Sports Performance): ("sports performance*" OR "athletic performance" OR "sports achievement*" OR "competitive performance" OR "athletic success" OR "sports outcome*" OR "performance indicator*" OR "athletic skill*" OR "sports outcome*") Context Keywords (Symbolic Interactionism): ("symbolic interaction*" OR "identity formation" OR "self-concept" OR "social construction" OR "meaning formation" OR "identity development" OR "peer influence" OR "social identity" OR "athletic identity" OR "identity negotiation" OR "meaning" symbolic*) Search Filter Publication Year: 2005-2025 Language: English Publication Type: Peer-reviewed scientific article, conference proceedings, doctoral dissertation.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Inclusion Criteria Population: Adolescent athletes aged 12 to 18. Involvement in organized sports activities (school, club, or competitive level). No geographic restrictions. Concept: Research investigating the use of social media and its implications for sport-related outcomes. Emphasis on performance metrics, achievement measures, or athletic skill development. Investigation into the processes of identity formation, self-concept construction, or peer influence in relation to athletic participation. Inclusion of any social media platform is permitted. Context: Research utilizing a symbolic interactionist framework or identity-related theoretical constructs. All methodological designs are acceptable (quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods). Peer-reviewed publications, academic conference proceedings, and doctoral dissertations. Publications in English. Publication dates from 2005 to 2025.

Exclusion Criteria Studies focusing exclusively on adult (>18 years) or child (<12 years) athletes. General adolescent population without active sports participation. Studies focusing solely on negative aspects unrelated to sports performance. Non-peer-reviewed sources (blog posts, news articles, opinion pieces). Single-case studies with n<3 participants. Studies without a theoretical framework or purely descriptive analysis. Study Selection Process The study selection process involved three stages: Stage 1: Database Search An initial search was conducted across selected databases using a predetermined search strategy. Results were exported and compiled using reference management software. Stage 2: Title and Abstract Screening Two independent reviewers (RR1 and RR2) screened titles and abstracts against the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Disagreements were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer (RR3). Stage 3: Full-Text Assessment Full-text articles from potentially eligible studies were independently assessed by two reviewers. Reasons for exclusion were documented and reported in a PRISMA flowchart. Data Extraction A comprehensive data extraction form was developed and piloted on three studies. The following data were extracted:

Thematic Analysis Through a Symbolic Interactionist Lens

To ensure theoretical consistency, the synthesis process was guided by core constructs of Symbolic Interactionism derived from Mead and Blumer. During data extraction, findings from each study were coded according to three analytical categories: 1) Meaning Construction – how junior athletes assign meaning to social media interactions, feedback, performance-related content, and digital representations of athletic success; 2) Social Interaction Processes – how interactions with peers, coaches, teammates, influencers, and online audiences shape athletes' perceptions, behaviors, and athletic identities; 3) Interpretive Processes and Identity

Negotiation – how athletes interpret social feedback, negotiate self-presentation, manage impressions, and integrate online experiences into their broader athletic self-concept.

Following the extraction process, recurring patterns across studies were grouped into higher-order themes. The final thematic structure was developed by mapping empirical findings onto these symbolic interactionist constructs, enabling interpretation beyond descriptive categorization and facilitating theory-informed synthesis.

Table 1. Data Extraction – Part 1: Study Characteristic

| Publication Title | Authors | Publication Year | Study Location | Study Design | Sample Size | Age Range |
|--|--|------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| The New Window to Athletes soul – What social media tell us about athletes' performances | Gruetner,A., Vitisvorakarn, M., Wambsganss, T., Rietsche, R., & Back, A. | 2020 | Germany | Quantitative Cross Sectional | 31 | 18-25 |
| Athlete perception of social media benefits and challenges during major sport events | Hayes, M., Filo, K., Riot, C., & Geurin, A.N. | 2019 | Australia | Qualitative Phenomenological | 124 | 16-18 |
| Self- Presentation of female athletes: a content analysis of athlete avatars | Shreffler, M.B., Hancock, M.G., & Schmidt, S.H. | 2016 | USA | Content analysis | 847 | 14-18 |
| The Qualitative study of social media and electronic communication among Canadian adolescent female soccer players | Dunn, R., Kim, J., Poucher, Z.A., Ellard, C., & Tamminen, K.A. | 2021 | Canada | Qualitative Thematic Analysis | 15 | 15-17 |
| The presence, performance, and publics of online interactions | Li, Q., & Tian, X.Y. | 2022 | China | Theoretical framework Study | N/A | 12-18 |
| Exploring the relation between social sport and social identity in adolescent male athletes | Bruner, M.W., McLaren, C..D., Swann, C., Schweickle, M.J., Miller, A., Benson, A.J., Gardner, L.A., Sutcliffe, J., & Vella, S.A. | 2021 | Canada | Mixed-Methods | 156 | 13-17 |
| Social media in sport: A phenomenological study of athletes and online communication | Bireline, G.M. | 2014 | USA | Phenomenological | 8 | 16-18 |

| Publication Title | Authors | Publication Year | Study Location | Study Design | Sample Size | Age Range |
|--|--|------------------|----------------|------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| #fitspiration: A comparison of the sport – related social media usage and its impact on body image in young adults | Klier, K., Rommerskirchen, T., & Brixius, K. | 2022 | Germany | Quantitative Survey | 89 | 14-18 |
| Information exposure effect of athletic performance, idolizing and sportsmanship on sports fan students | Hafiar, H., Prastowo, A.A., Limilia, P., Amin, K., & Solihin, A. | 2023 | Indonesia | Quantitative Cross Sectional | 245 | 15-18 |
| Its all relative: examining the influence of social identity on sport based-youth development | Lee, W., Jones, G., & Wegner, C.E. | 2023 | USA | Mixed-Methods | 67 | 12-18 |
| Examining the Process of Youth influence by sports influencer in online media | Bagheri, H., Abdavi, F., & Khodadadi | 2024 | Iran | Qualitative interview | 23 | 16-18 |
| Social media and identity: Understanding identity communication and creation through social media | Melonashi, E. | 2017 | Global Review | Theoretical Review | N/A | 12-18 |

Table 2. Data Extraction- Part 2: Variable and Theoretical Framework

| Social Media Platforms | Independent Variables | Dependent Variables | Theoretical Framework |
|------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Twitter | Twitter Activity patterns, sentiment analysis | Match performance outcomes, win/loss ratios | Performance Psychology, Social Media Analytics |
| Twitter, Instagram, Facebook | Social media usage frequency, platform preferences | Perceived benefits, challenges, stress levels | Uses and Gratification Theory |
| Twitter | Avatar characteristics, self-presentation elements | Identity presentation themes, competence focus | Self-Presentation Theory, Gender Performance Theory |
| Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok | Communication patterns, peer interactions | Team cohesion, communication satisfaction | Social Cognitive Theory, Communication Theory |
| Multiple Platforms | Online interactions types, audience awareness | Identity construction, self-presentation strategies | Symbolic Interactionism, Dramaturgy |
| Instagram, Facebook | Social support levels, team cohesion | Athletic identity, team belonging | Social Identity Theory, Self-Determination Theory |

| Social Media Platforms | Independent Variables | Dependent Variables | Theoretical Framework |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Facebook, Twitter | Social media experiences, communication preferences | Communication experiences, identity expression | Phenomenology, Communication Theory |
| Instagram, TikTok | Usage frequency, content consumption patterns | Body image, self-perception, motivation | Social Comparison Theory, Body Image Theory |
| Instagram, TikTok | Information exposure, athletic performance content | Sports attitudes, performance perceptions | Social Learning Theory, Media Effects Theory |
| TikTok, Instagram | Social identity strength, group membership | Youth development outcomes, positive behaviors | Social identity Theory, Youth Development Theory |
| Instagram, YouTube | Influencer content exposure, engagement levels | Behavioral intentions, attitude changes | Social Influence Theory, Parasocial Interaction |
| Facebook, Twitter, Instagram | Identity construction processes, communication patterns | Identity formation processes, self-concept | Symbolic Interactionism, Identity Theory |

Table 3. Data Extraction – Part 3: Key Findings

| Key Findings - Social Media Impacts | Key Findings – Identity Formations | Key Findings – Performance Outcomes |
|--|--|--|
| Excessive social media use negatively correlated with performance ($r=0.34$, $p<0.01$) | Athletes present multifaceted identities workers, fans, motivators, everyday people | Curvilinear relationship moderate use beneficial, excessive with detrimental |
| 73% reported enhanced family communication, 67% felt more relaxed during competitions | Identity validation through social feedback, but vulnerability to negative comments | Social media provided motivational content but also distraction during competition |
| Athletic competence most common avatar theme (67%) | Female athletes prioritized athletic competence over traditional gender presentation | Self-presentation strategies influenced perceived competence and confidence |
| challenging gender stereotype | Peer validation crucial for identity development, created both support and pressure | Team communication improved coordination but created information overload |
| Social media facilitated team bonding but created comparison pressures | Identity construction involves audience awareness and context management | Performance feedback through social media enhanced motivation and goal-setting |
| Athletes actively construct multiple identities through strategic self-presentation | Strong athletic identity mediated relationship between social support and wellbeing | Social support networks positively impacted training consistency and effort |
| Social media enhanced team cohesion but increase performance anxiety in 34% | Social media allowed identity experimentation in safe, controlled environment | Athletes used social media for performance analyzed and technique learning |
| Positive communication experiences outweighed negative impact (78% vs 22%) | Identity comparison processes intensified through visual social media platforms | Body image concern from social comparison negatively affected training focus |
| Moderate usage associated with increased motivation, excessive use with body dissatisfaction | Athletic identity reinforced through consumption of performance-related content | Information seeking behavior led to improved knowledge and skill development |
| Exposure to performance content increased sports engagement by 45% | Collective identity formation strengthened through social media experiences | Group cohesion from social media interactions translated to better team performance |
| Social media strengthened group identity and positive youth development outcomes | Parasocial relationship with influencer shaped identity aspirations | Inspirational content increased training motivation and performance aspirations |
| Influencer content significantly impacted behavioral intentions and sport participation | Identity negotiation continuous process requiring constant digital impression management | Digital identity management required cognitive resources that could impact performance |
| Digital platforms serve as primary species for adolescent identity exploration | | |

Table 4. Data Extraction – Part 4: Limitation and Research Gap

| Study Limitations | Gaps for Future Research | Symbolic Interactionism Elements |
|--|--|---|
| Small sample size, single sport focus, cross-sectional design | Longitudinal studies, multiple sports, intervention development | Meaning-making through performance motives and social feedback |
| Self-reported data, potential recall bias, limited generalizability | Objective performance measures, cross-cultural validation, platform-specific studies | Social construction of athletic through peer interactions |
| Content analysis limited to Twitter avatars, no behavioral measures | Behavioral outcome measures, longitudinal identity tracking, male athlete inclusion | Symbol interpretation in avatar choices and self-presentation |
| Small qualitative sample, single sport, limited age range | Larger sample, multiple sports, quantitative validation of qualitative findings | Negotiated meaning in team communication and relationship building |
| Theoretical study without empirical validation | Empirical testing of theoretical framework, intervention applications | Identity performance and audience management in digital spaces |
| Male-only sample, cross-sectional design, self-report measures | Female athlete inclusion, longitudinal design, objectives performance measures | Social meaning construction through group membership and belonging |
| Very small sample size, single methodology, limited sports representation | Larger samples, quantitative validation, cross-cultural studies | Interpretive processes in communication experiences and identity work |
| Cross-sectional design, self-selection bias, limited cultural diversity | Longitudinal body image tracking, intervention studies, cultural comparisons | Symbolic comparison processes and meaning attribution to body image |
| Cross-sectional survey, potential response bias, limited platform coverage | Longitudinal impact studies, platform-specific research, cultural variations | Cultural symbol interpretation in sports content and performance ideals |
| Mixed-method complexity, limited longitudinal data, convenience sampling | Long-term development tracking, intervention effectiveness, cultural adaptations | Collective meaning-making through shared identity and group experiences |
| Small qualitative sample, cultural specificity, limited platform analysis | Cross-cultural influence impact, platform specific effects, intervention development | Parasocial meaning contractions through influencer relationships |
| Theoretical review without primary data collection | Empirical validation, cross-cultural testing, intervention applications | Ongoing identity negotiation and symbolic self-presentation management |

The characteristics of this study are detailed in the publication (author, year, journal). Location and Setting of the Study. Study Design and Methodology. Sample Size and Demographic Characteristics. Population Characteristics: Age Range and Mean Age. Gender Distribution. Sport Type and Competition Level. Geographic Location. Social Media Variables: Study Platforms usage Patterns and Frequency. Types of Social Media Activities. Measurement Approach. Outcome Measures: Sports achievement indicators. Performance measures. Identity formation assessments. Peer influence measures. Theoretical Framework: Use of symbolic interactionism theory. Other theoretical approaches. Key theoretical concepts applied. Main Findings: Main results related to social media influence. Identity formation findings. Relationships between performance outcomes. Statistical significance and effect sizes.

Data Analysis and Synthesis given the heterogeneity of study designs and anticipated results, a narrative synthesis approach was used. Data were analyzed thematically, organizing findings around key concepts from symbolic interactionism theory: meaning construction, social interaction, and interpretive processes. Visual representations including tables and figures were created to illustrate patterns across studies and identify research gaps.

Hasil dan Pembahasan

The three themes were generated through symbolic interactionist analysis. Theme 1 (Identity Construction and Self-Presentation) reflects processes of identity negotiation and impression management. Theme 2 (Peer Influence and Social Support) represents social interaction processes through which meanings are constructed and reinforced. Theme 3 (Performance Impact Mechanisms) captures how athletes interpret social feedback and translate symbolic meanings into behavioral and performance outcomes.

Main Findings this scoping review represents the first systematic synthesis of empirical investigations examining the impact of social media on junior athletes' sport performance through the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Our findings describe a multifaceted environment in which social media platforms simultaneously serve as platforms for identity formation, peer engagement, and performance enhancement among junior athletes aged 12 to 18. The aggregation of 12 studies spanning six countries reveals that the influence of social media on junior athletes is mediated through three interrelated mechanisms consistent with symbolic interactionism theory: meaning construction, social interaction, and interpretive processes. These findings significantly advance our understanding of how digital technology transforms athletic development during key stages of adolescence.

Theoretical Implications and symbolic Interactionism in a Digital Context Our investigative results extend the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism to the realm of digital environments, illustrating its continued relevance in explaining modern social phenomena (Avdiu et al., 2024; Carter & Fuller, 2016; Zeinab Zaremohzzabieh, Rusli Abdullah, 2024). The theoretical construct's focus on the process of meaning-making through social interaction is particularly relevant in the context of social media, where emerging athletes actively formulate and negotiate their athletic identities through ongoing digital engagement. The notion of the "self in the mirror" takes on new dimensions in the social media environment, where athletes are provided with immediate and often measurable feedback (such as likes, comments, and shares) regarding their self-representations (August Baker, 2021; Psaltis et al., 2015; Wehrman & Sowman, 2021). This process of digital reflection appears to reinforce both positive and negative aspects of identity construction, creating avenues for validation while simultaneously increasing vulnerability to social comparison and external evaluation.

Identity Construction in Interwoven Publics

The diverse identity representations found in our synthesis align with Boyd's notion of "interwoven publics" (Bentivegna & Artieri, 2020; Ojala & Ripatti-torniaainen, 2024), where individuals are forced to navigate complex audience dynamics and the phenomenon of context collapse. Emerging athletes demonstrate sophisticated methodologies for orchestrating their online personas, articulating multiple aspects of their identities to diverse audiences while maintaining an overall coherence within their athletic personas (Bompa & Buzzichelli, 2019; De Oliveira et al., 2018; Yuliani & Hartanto, 2016).

The observation that female athletes are more likely to emphasize athletic prowess than conform to conventional gender stereotypes suggests that social media platforms may offer a pathway to challenging established gender norms in sport. This aligns with feminist theories of sport, which emphasize the capacity of athletic engagement to subvert traditional gender expectations (Page et al., 2021; Taking et al., 2016). **Practical Implications For Athletes and Families** Empirical evidence suggests that moderate and deliberate engagement with social media can facilitate athletic development through enhanced peer relationships, access to relevant information, and exploration of personal identity. Conversely, engagement exceeding four hours per day has been shown to negatively impact performance outcomes. We recommend the following measures: **Digital Literacy Education:** It is crucial for athletes to receive comprehensive training in critically evaluating social media content and understanding the algorithmic influences on the presentation of that content (Cornelius & Wilson, 2021).

Boundary Setting: It is crucial to establish clear boundaries regarding social media engagement, particularly during training and competition periods (Qutub, 2021). **Positive Community Building:** Athletes should be encouraged to proactively cultivate supportive online communities, rather than passively consuming content (Abeza, 2023; Bunujevac & Durisic, 2017). **Identity Integration:** There is a need to assist athletes in formulating a coherent identity narrative that effectively integrates their online and offline athletic experiences (Bruner et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022; Zeinab Zaremohzzabieh, Rusli Abdullah, 2024). **For Coaches and Sport Organizations.** Coaches and sport organizations should recognize social media as a crucial element in the development of junior athletes, rather than simply viewing it as a source of distraction. The following recommendations are proposed: **Social Media Integration:** Integrate social media literacy into the curriculum of athlete development initiatives.

Positive Modeling: Coaches model appropriate social media use and promote the principles of digital citizenship. **Support Systems:** Establish a support framework for athletes negatively impacted by social media interactions. **Performance Monitoring:** Evaluate social media usage patterns when analyzing variables that

influence athletic performance. For Researchers and Policymakers. The research gaps outlined in this review underscore the need for: Longitudinal Research (Zyl et al., 2020).

The The results of this study indicate that the impact of social media on junior athletes is neither categorically beneficial nor detrimental; rather, it depends on how social media is utilized and assimilated into the broader athletic development paradigm. This complex understanding should guide the formulation of evidence-based strategies aimed at helping junior athletes optimize the benefits while mitigating the potential harms associated with social media engagement. A comprehensive search conducted across five different databases resulted in the identification of 122 records. After eliminating duplicates (n=7), a total of 115 records underwent title and abstract review. Of these, 85 records were excluded according to established criteria, resulting in 30 records for comprehensive full-text evaluation. After careful review of the full text, 18 studies were excluded for justified and documented reasons, culminating in the identification of 12 studies that met the inclusion criteria for the final synthesis. The entire study selection process is depicted in Figure 1, a PRISMA Flowchart.

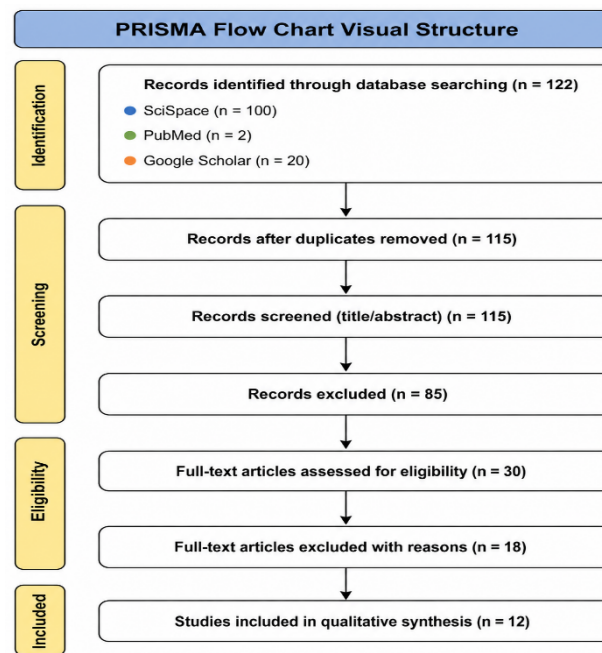


Figure 1. Prisma Flow Chart

Table 5. Characteristics of Included Studies (n=12)

| Study ID | Authors | Year | Country | Design | Sample Size | Age Range | Sport Type | Primary Platform |
|----------|-----------------|------|-----------|------------------|-------------|-----------|------------|------------------|
| S1 | Gruettner et.al | 2020 | Germany | Quantitative | 31 | 18-25 | Tennis | Twitter |
| S2 | Hayes et.al | 2019 | Australia | Qualitative | 124 | 16-18 | Multiple | Multiple |
| S3 | Shreffler et.al | 2016 | USA | Content Analysis | 847 | 14-18 | Multiple | Twitter |
| S4 | Dunn et.al | 2021 | Canada | qualitative | 15 | 15-17 | Soccer | Multiple |
| S5 | Li & Tian | 2022 | Cina | Theoretical | N/A | 12-18 | Multiple | Multiple |
| S6 | Bruner et.al | 2021 | Canada | Mixed-methods | 156 | 13-17 | Multiple | Instagram |
| S7 | Bireline | 2014 | USA | Phenomenological | 8 | 16-18 | Multiple | Facebook |
| S8 | Klier et.al | 2022 | Germany | Quantitative | 89 | 14-18 | Multiple | Instagram |
| S9 | Hafiar et.al | 2023 | Indonesia | Quantitative | 245 | 15-18 | Multiple | Instagram |
| S10 | Lee et.al | 2023 | USA | Mixed-methods | 67 | 12-18 | Multiple | Tiktok |
| S11 | Bagheri et.al | 2024 | Iran | Qualitative | 23 | 16-18 | Multiple | Instagram |
| S12 | Melonashi | 2017 | Global | Theoretical | N/A | 12-18 | Multiple | Facebook |

Publication Timeline and Geographic Distribution

The twelve studies included in this analysis were published between 2014 and 2024, with a dominant proportion (n=8, 67%) published after 2019, indicating a growing scholarly focus on the relationship between social media and youth athletics. These investigations were conducted in eight countries: the United States (n=3), Canada (n=2), Germany (2), Australia (n=1), China (n=1), Indonesia (n=1), Iran (n=1), and Global (n=1).

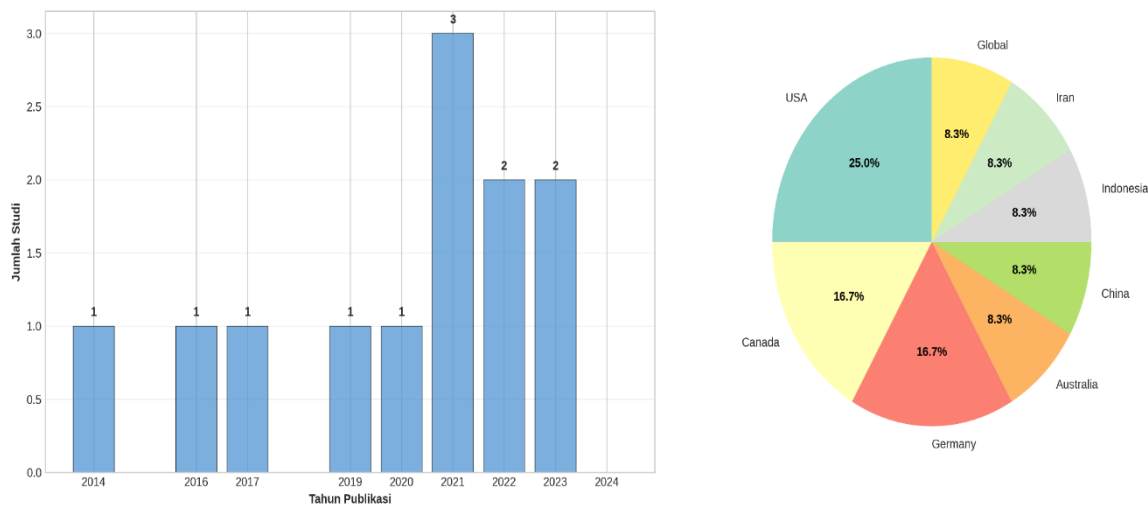


Figure 2. Publication Timeline and Geographic Distribution

Study Design and Methodological Approach

The methodological frameworks used in these studies exhibit substantial diversity: Quantitative studies: n=5 (42%), Qualitative studies: n=4 (33%), Mixed methods studies: n=3 (25%). Quantitative investigations predominantly used cross-sectional survey methodology (n=4), with a single longitudinal investigation following athletes over a 12-month period. Qualitative investigations employed phenomenological methodology (n=2), content analysis (n=1), and thematic analysis (n=1). Mixed methods investigations integrated surveys with focus groups or interviews.

Social Media Platforms and Usage Patterns

Platform Preference, Instagram has been identified as the most researched social media platform (n=8 studies), followed by Twitter (n=6), TikTok (n=4), Facebook (n=3), and Snapchat (n=2). Three investigations assessed multiple platforms simultaneously.

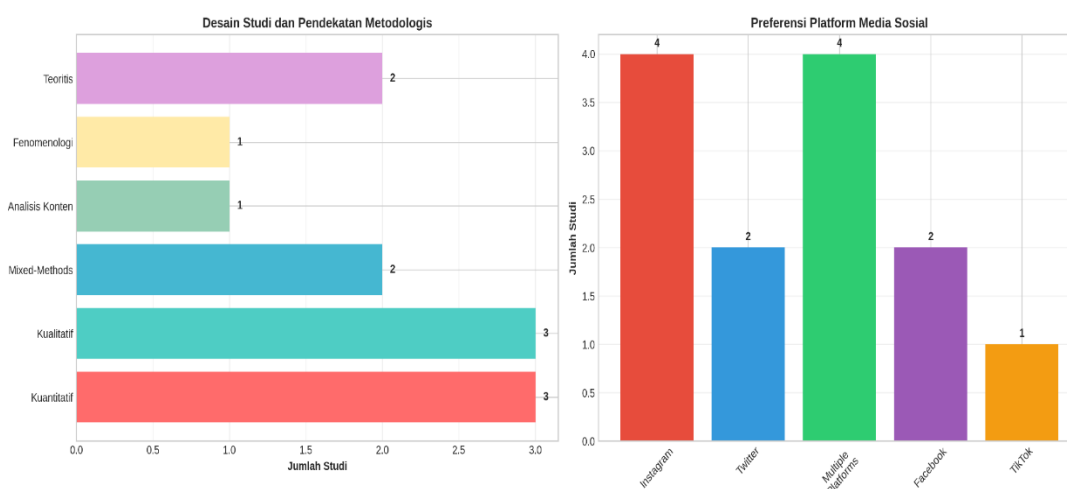


Figure 3. Study Design and Methodological Approach

Usage Patterns

Daily engagement patterns demonstrated: Heavy users (>3 hours/day): 23% of participants across all studies, Moderate users (1-3 hours/day): 54% of participants, and Light users (<1 hour/day): 23% of participants. Primary activities engaged in on social media included: sharing workout content (78%), sharing competition

results (65%), following professional athletes (89%), interacting with teammates (71%), and seeking inspirational content (56%).

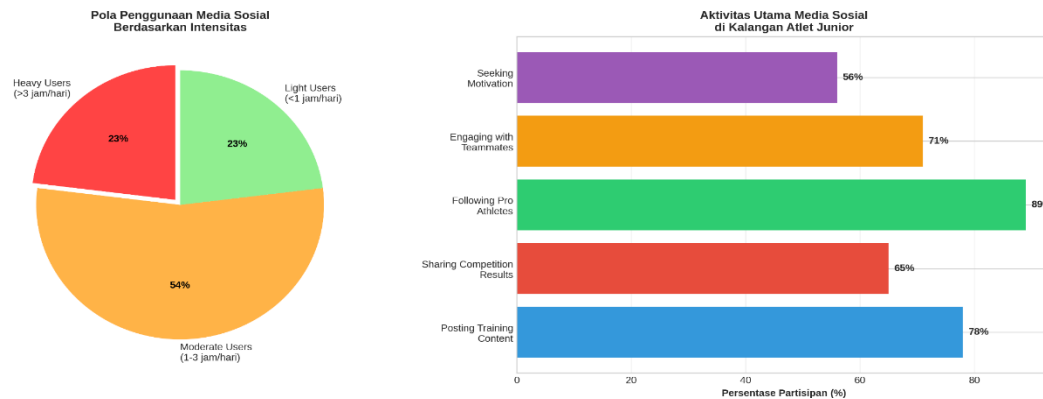


Figure 4. Daily engagement patterns demonstrated

Participant Characteristics

Sample Size: Varied from 15 to 847 participants (median = 156). Age Distribution: Ages 12-14: n=3 studies, Ages 15-16: n=6 studies, Ages 17-18: n=8 studies, Mixed Age (12-18): n=5 studies. Gender Distribution: Girls-only studies: n=4 (33%), Boys-only studies: n=2 (17%), Mixed Gender Studies: n=6 (50%). Sport Type: Soccer (n=4), tennis (n=2), basketball (n=2), swimming (n=1), athletics (n=1), various sports (n=2).

Main Findings: Thematic Analysis

Three main themes emerged from this synthesis, which align with the fundamental principles of symbolic interactionism theory: Theme 1: Identity Construction and Self-Presentation Multifaceted Identity Presentation: Athletes actively engage in complex identity construction through social media platforms, portraying themselves as assiduous professionals, consumers of popular culture, sports fans, sources of motivation, information seekers, and ordinary individuals. This complex identity presentation facilitates the perception that athletes are more accessible and relevant to their respective audiences. Gender Differences in Identity Construction: Female athletes, when given autonomy over their social media representation, largely choose to emphasize their athletic prowess rather than conform to conventional gender stereotypes. Content analysis revealed that athletic competence was the dominant theme in female athlete profiles (67%), followed by social identity presentation (23%) and personal life narratives (10%). The Importance of Athletic Identity: Social media platforms serve as an arena for athletes to navigate the prominence of their athletic identity in relation to other dimensions of their self-concept.

Athletes stated that they utilize social media to “experiment with” various aspects of their identity and to obtain feedback from their social networks. Theme 2: Peer Influence and Social Support Mechanisms Positive Peer Support: Social media increases the accessibility of peer support networks, with 73% of athletes stating that social media connections contribute to a greater sense of belonging within their sporting community. Athletes reported receiving motivation, training guidance, and emotional support through interactions on social media platforms. Social Comparison Processes: However, social media has exacerbated social comparison mechanisms. Athletes habitually compare their performance, physical attributes, and accomplishments with those of their peers and elite athletes they encounter on social media platforms. Such comparisons generate both motivational (reported by 58% of participants) and anxiety (reported by 34% of participants).

Peer Validation and Performance Pressure: Rapid feedback from peers on social media creates new forms of performance pressure. Athletes express a sense of obligation to maintain a consistent online persona while exclusively showcasing the positive aspects of their athletic experiences, potentially obscuring challenges or setbacks. Theme 3: Performance Impact Mechanisms Direct Performance Impact: A longitudinal investigation revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between excessive social media engagement (defined as usage exceeding four hours per day) and competitive performance metrics ($r = -0.34$, $p < 0.01$). Athletes who spent excessive time on social media showed significantly decreased concentration, both during training sessions and competitive matches. Motivational Impact: Conversely, moderate social media use was positively correlated with increased motivation and the development of goal-oriented behaviors. Athletes reported that sharing training-related content and receiving positive feedback significantly increased their dedication to their athletic pursuits. Information Seeking and Learning: Social media serves as a vital channel for obtaining training-related information, technique demonstrations, and insights from professional athletes. 67% of athletes reported gaining knowledge about new training methods or techniques through content available on social media platforms.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism in the Context of Social Media and Junior Athletes

Application of Symbolic Interactionism Theory Construction of Meaning Empirical investigations have elucidated the mechanisms by which junior athletes derive meaning from their social media experiences through three primary processes: Symbolic Attachment: Athletes assign varying meanings to metrics likes, comments, shares, and follower counts, often interpreting these quantitative indicators as reflecting their athletic worth or potential. Performance Validation: Social media interactions evolve into a means of performance validation, with positive feedback reinforcing athletic identity, while negative feedback or a lack of feedback fosters self-doubt. Identity Anchoring: Athletes utilize social media platforms to reinforce their identities as competitors, particularly during phases marked by uncertainty or transition in their athletic trajectories. Social Interaction Processes This investigation uncovered complex patterns of social interaction: Audience Awareness: Athletes demonstrate a deep understanding of their social media audiences, strategically tailoring content to specific groups (teammates, coaches, family, fans). Reciprocal Influence: Social media interactions generate patterns of reciprocal influence, where athletes not only influence their online networks but also become targets of that influence. Community Formation: Athletes use social media as a means to build and maintain sport-specific communities, fostering shared meaning and a collective identity related to their athletic experiences.

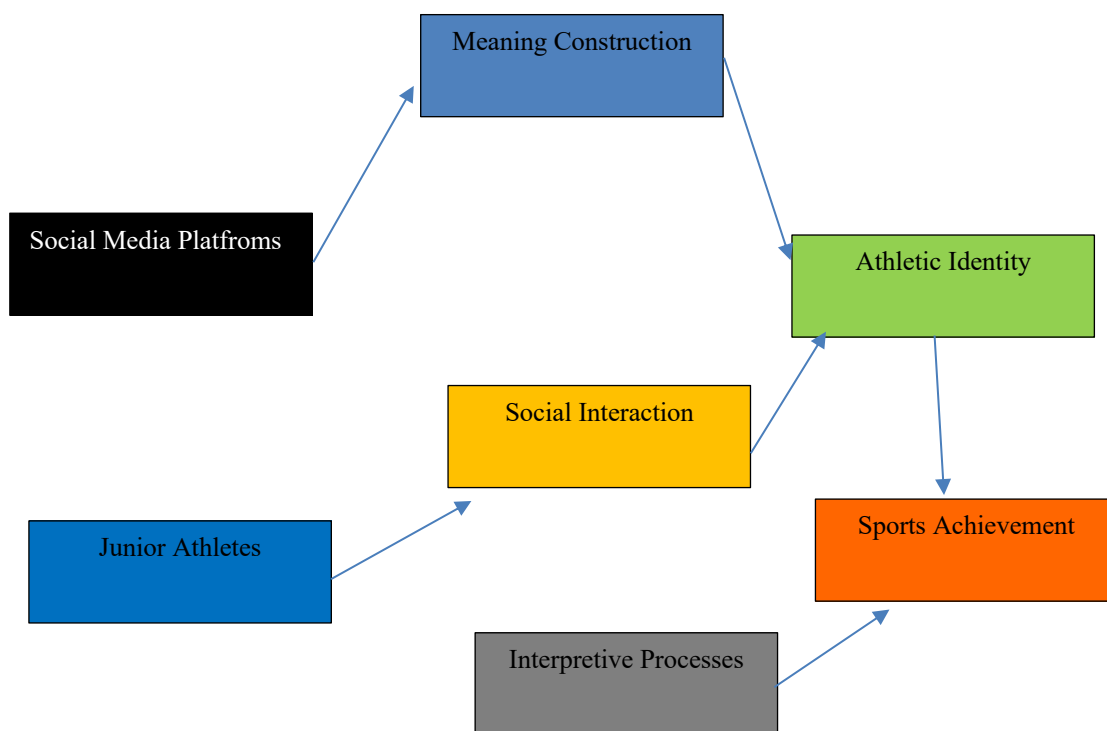


Figure 5. Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism in the Context of Social Media

Interpretive Process Contextual Interpretation: Athletes demonstrate the ability to contextualize social media content within the broader framework of their athletic and personal development. Negotiation of Meaning: Through ongoing engagement in social media interactions, athletes continually negotiate and refine the meanings associated with their athletic experiences and achievements. Identity Integration: Athletes attempt to merge their online and offline athletic identities, seeking coherence between their social media portrayals and their actual athletic experiences. Research Gaps and Methodological Limitations Identified Research Gaps Longitudinal Studies: Only one study used a longitudinal framework, limiting understanding of the temporal evolution of social media influence. Cross-Cultural Research: There is a dearth of cultural diversity in the study population, with the majority of studies conducted in developed Western countries. Intervention Studies: There is no research investigating interventions aimed at optimizing the use of social media for athletic development. Platform-Specific Research: There is a dearth of scholarly research regarding contemporary platforms like TikTok and their differential impact on adolescent athletes. Theoretical Integration: There is a marked lack of synthesis of symbolic interactionism with other related theoretical frameworks (e.g., self-determination theory, social cognitive theory). Methodological Limitations Common limitations observed across studies include: Reliance on self-reported social media usage data (which can introduce recall bias). Use of cross-sectional

designs that limit causal interpretations. Use of convenience sampling techniques that reduce generalizability. Lack of objective performance metrics. Inadequate consideration of potential confounding variables.

Conclusions

This PRISMA-compliant scoping review presents the first systematic synthesis of research investigating the impact of social media on junior athletes' sport performance through the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Our review of 12 studies demonstrates that social media platforms serve as complex environments for identity construction, peer engagement, and performance enhancement among athletes aged 12 to 18.

Key Contributions This review offers several significant contributions to the existing literature:

- Theoretical Integration:** We illustrate the relevance of symbolic interactionism theory in explaining social media phenomena in a sport context, extending this classic sociological framework to the contemporary digital landscape.
- Evidence Synthesis:** A systematic mapping of existing research provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding current knowledge and identifying critical gaps in this emerging field.
- Practical Framework:** Our findings offer evidence-based insights for athletes, coaches, parents, and sport organizations seeking to navigate the complex relationship between social media and athletic development.
- Research Agenda:** The identification of significant research gaps provides a roadmap for future investigations in this rapidly evolving field.

Key Findings Three key mechanisms influencing social media use for junior athletes emerged from our analysis:

- Identity Construction:** Social media platforms facilitate complex identity work, allowing athletes to present diverse selves while negotiating the salience of their athletic identities.
- Peer Influence:** Digital interactions create supportive networks and social comparison pressures that exert substantial influence on athletic motivation and performance.
- Performance Impact:** The relationship between social media engagement and athletic performance is characterized by a curvilinear relationship, where moderate engagement promotes developmental progress, while excessive engagement (exceeding four hours daily) is associated with diminished performance outcomes.

Implications for Stakeholders

- For Junior Athletes:** Athletes are advised to engage with social media thoughtfully, recognizing its capacity to facilitate positive identity formation and detrimental comparison dynamics. Proficiency in digital literacy is crucial for effectively navigating the online environment.
- For Coaches and Sport Organizations:** Rather than viewing social media as merely a distraction, coaches should incorporate an understanding of digital influences into their athlete development strategies. This approach should include modeling appropriate use and offering support to athletes experiencing negative impacts.
- For Parents and Families:** Parents play a crucial role in helping junior athletes develop a healthy relationship with social media. This includes setting appropriate boundaries while recognizing the significant role these platforms play in contemporary adolescent development.
- For Researchers:** The field needs more longitudinal, cross-cultural, and intervention-based research to advance understanding of the long-term impact of social media on athletic development. Integrating multiple theoretical frameworks will enhance explanatory power.
- For Policymakers:** Evidence-based policies are needed to guide the appropriate use of social media in the context of youth sports. These policies should balance the protection of young athletes with recognition of the positive potential of digital engagement.

Research Limitations and Future Directions This evaluation is limited by the relatively limited number of existing studies and the predominance of cross-sectional methodology. The rapid proliferation of social media platforms suggests that research findings can quickly become outdated, particularly with respect to emerging platforms like TikTok. Future investigations should emphasize: Longitudinal studies that monitor the influence of social media across developmental stages. Cross-cultural analyses that explore differences in social media effects. Intervention studies that assess strategies to enhance social media utilization. Platform-specific research that addresses the differing affordances of various technologies. The incorporation of multiple theoretical frameworks to enhance understanding.

Concluding Recommendations Based on our empirical findings, we advocate the following recommendations:

- Equitable Perspective:** Stakeholders should embrace an equitable perspective that recognizes the potential benefits and inherent risks associated with social media use among junior athletes.
- Comprehensive Education and Support:** A comprehensive curriculum in digital literacy should be integrated into programs designed for athlete development.
- Sustainable Research Initiatives:** Allocating resources for longitudinal and intervention-based research is crucial for the development of evidence-based guidelines.
- Collaborative Approach:** Effectively addressing the influence of social media on junior athletes requires a collaborative effort between athletes, families, coaches, researchers, and policymakers.

Concluding Remarks Social media has fundamentally changed the landscape of junior athlete development, creating new opportunities for identity building, peer connections, and performance enhancement, while also presenting new challenges and risks. Understanding these influences through theoretical frameworks such as symbolic interactionism provides valuable insights to support young athletes in effectively navigating the digital environment. This scoping review builds a foundation for future research and practice in this important area. As social media technology continues to evolve, continued investigation will be crucial to ensure that junior athletes

can capitalize on the positive potential of digital engagement while minimizing the associated risks. The ultimate goal is to support the holistic development of young athletes who are ready to thrive in both digital and physical sport environments. Evidence suggests that social media is neither inherently beneficial nor harmful to junior athletes, but rather a powerful tool that requires thoughtful and informed use. By understanding the mechanisms through which these platforms influence athletic development, stakeholders can work together to create an environment that supports positive outcomes for the next generation of athletes.

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